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France Dominates Europe's Digital Library

By STEPHEN CASTLE
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BRUSSELS — France has never been shy about promoting its culture, so few were surprised when it took a close interest in a new digital library intended to showcase Europe's history, literature, arts and science.

But when the new site, called Europeana, begins life on Thursday, more than half of its two million items will come from just one of the 27 countries in the European Union: France.

So comprehensive is France's cultural dominance over this cyberspace outpost that other countries are having their own history written for them — in French, of course.

"I find the figures extraordinary," said Viviane Reding, the European commissioner responsible for the project. "France has half the content — the collapse of the Berlin Wall is illustrated with a French TV documentary."

She said that some countries that had been skeptical about the project changed their minds now that the library was a reality.

Europeana combines the digital resources of museums and libraries, and the information provided includes paintings, maps, videos and newspapers.

Material is free of copyright so it can be downloaded for blogs, research or schoolwork by anyone with an Internet connection.

Already, the images online include the Magna Carta from Britain, the Vermeer painting "Girl With a Pearl Earring" from the Mauritshuis Museum in The Hague and a copy of Dante's "Divine Comedy."

But only 1 percent of the content has information about Germany, 1.4 percent about Spain and only 10 percent about Britain.

Stephen Bury, head of British and American Collections at the British Library, described it as a "great achievement" and said his institution was relaxed about the dominance of Gallic culture.

The European Commission says that if it achieves its aim of putting 10 million items onto the digital library by 2010, it will come at a price of 350 million to 400 million euros.

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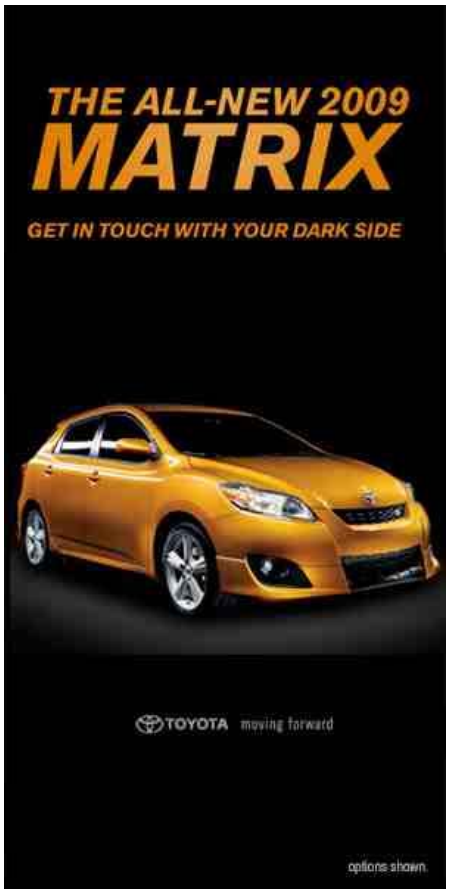

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